

# Regional Women Writers



- They are the 'literary daughters' of the so-called Sentimental women writers (Augusta Evans, Susan Warner, Louisa May Alcott...)
- Less productive than their 'literary mothers'
- Less professionally active, less career-oriented and less successful than previous generation
- Tended to write short stories instead of voluminous volumes
- Stayed in their own regions

# “Local Color” Writers

- Writers focus on a specific geographical area
- Capture with fidelity linguistic, topographical, and cultural peculiarities of their environment
- Share with male regional writers (Mark Twain, George Washington Cable...) their interest in detail, the direct observation of American surroundings, and the use of their native land as fictional material

# Writers

- Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Alice Brown... → New England writers
- Kate Chopin, Grace King and Sarah Barnwell Elliott → Southern writers

# Position in the canon

- Neglected until recently by literary historians
- Contemporary scholars have recognised an innovative dimension in the writings of Grace Chopin, Grace King, Sarah B. Elliott or Sarah Orne Jewett
- Revision of gender and, in the case of Southern writers, racial stereotypes

- Other regional writers who engaged in subverting racial and gender stereotypes: George Washington Cable, author of *The Grandissimes*, *Madame Delphine* (1881) and *True Stories of Louisiana* (1888)
- Criticized the myth of womanhood in plantation life and attempted to devise new roles for women
- Interesting depiction of mulatto women

# Local Color and Realism

Eric Sundquist: “Those in power (say, white urban males) have been more often judged 'realists,' while those removed from the seats of power (say, Midwesterners, blacks, immigrants, or women) have been categorized as regionalists” (from the *Encyclopedia of Southern Literature*)

# New England regional stories

- Characters are often women living on their own
- The setting is a vanishing rural world
- This records a historical phenomenon: the impact on rural women of mass-scale migration of men to the big towns
- The impact of the Civil War is also felt in these narratives



# New England regional writers

- Few male characters (often depicted as intruders or as unsuitable): “The White Heron” or “Louisa”
- Stories often revise the stereotype of the frustrated spinster or the myth of the helpless girl or woman

# Sarah Orne Jewett (1849-1909)

- Born in South Berwick, Maine, daughter of a country doctor
- Inspired by Harriet Beecher's Stowe's Main novel *The Pearl of Orr's Island* (1862), she began to write regionalist fiction about Maine
- Her work was published and encouraged by William Dean Howells, editor of *Atlantic Monthly*
- Her most famous works: *The White Heron* (1886) and *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896)

# Young Man & Sylvia: Issues

- city versus country life
- violence against nature
- money
- love

# A Pine-tree: a central symbol of Sylvia's quest



“The last of its  
generation...”

A landmark for sea  
and shore miles and  
miles away”

# Climbing the Tree: Symbolic Journey

- Struggle: “her bare feet and fingers, that pinched and held *like bird's claws* to the monstrous ladder reaching up”; “the sharp dry twigs caught and held her and scratched her *like angry talons*”
- Bond between tree and child: “This determined spark of human spirit. . . . The old pine must have loved his new dependent. . . . the brave, beating heart of the solitary gray-eyed child”
- Vision: “like the great main-mast of the voyaging earth”; “truly it was a vast and awesome world”

## Climax: To speak or not to speak?

*“The splendid moment has come to speak of the dead hemlock-tree by the green marsh”*

*“No, she must keep silence! . . . Sylvia cannot speak; she cannot tell the heron’s secret and give its life away”*

What are the implications of Sylvia’s choice?

# “The White Heron”

- Annis Pratt, in *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*, has written that in novels of development, nature “becomes an ally of the woman hero, keeping her in touch with her selfhood, a kind of talisman that enables her to make her way through the alienations of male society”

## Climax: To speak or not to speak?

- the splendid moment has come to speak of the dead hemlock-tree by the green marsh” (¶38)
- “No, she must keep silence! . . . Sylvia cannot speak; she cannot tell the heron’s secret and give its life away” (¶40)



# Kate Chopin (1850-1904)



# Life

- Born Kate O'Flaherty in St. Louis, Missouri. Fatherless since she was a child, she lived at home with her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, all of them widows. Her great-grandmother oversaw her education and taught her French, music, and the gossip on St. Louis women of the past. Kate O'Flaherty grew up surrounded by smart, independent, single women.

# Life

- At the age of twenty, she married Oscar Chopin, the son of a wealthy cotton-growing family in Louisiana. He was French catholic in background, as was Kate. They lived in New Orleans.
- When Oscar died, Kate took over the running of his general store and plantation for over a year. When her mother died, Kate started writing to ease her pain and to help support her children

# Works

- Her first novel, *At Fault*, was published in 1890, followed by two collections of her short stories, *Bayou Folk* in 1894 and *A Night in Arcadie* in 1897. *The Awakening* was published in 1899, and by then she was well known as both a local colorist and a woman writer, and had published over one hundred stories, essays, and sketches in literary magazines.

# The writing of *The Awakening*

- "Having a group of people at my disposal, I thought it might be entertaining (to myself) to throw them together and see what would happen. I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did. If I had the slightest intimation of such a thing, I would have excluded her from the company. But when I found out what she was up to, the play was half over, and it was then too late."

# Quotes to frame *The Awakening*

Motherhood demands of women her highest endeavor, the broadest culture ... It demands of her that she become a physician, an artist, a teacher, a poet, a philosopher and a priest.

(John Raymond, "The Demands of the Age", 1895)

The woman who works outside of the home pays a fearful penalty, either physical, mental or moral, and often all three. She commits a biological crime against herself and against the community ...

(Ward Hutchinson, *The American Medical Bulletin*, 1895).

[A society woman], in spite of, or perhaps because of, her increasing public role, is even more zealously patronized as a fragile, helpless object, used in a decorative and literal sense to adorn the household: a man's wealth and position are judged by the style in which he keeps his wife.

(Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 1912)

# Main themes in *The Awakening*

- A wife's impatience and frustration with marriage
- A rejection of the traditional roles of women
- a woman's acknowledgement of and responses to her sexual urges
- A quest for freedom and personal fulfillment

According to Annis Pratt, "the novel of development portrays a world in which the young woman hero is destined for disappointment ... Every element of her desired world –freedom to come and go, allegiance to nature, meaningful work, exercise of the intellect, and use of her own erotic capabilities– inevitably clashes with society's norms ... This collision between the heroine's evolving self and society's imposed identity appears throughout the history of women's fiction..." (*Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*)



- After *The Awakening* was published, literary critics condemned it for being “sordid” and “immoral”
- After a decade of writing, Kate Chopin ended her literary career
- Kate died on August 20, 1904 of a cerebral hemorrhage after attending the St. Louis World’s Fair

# Bibliography

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Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*, Indiana UP, 1981